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# Measuring the perceptions of senior officers of the South African National Defence Force towards terrorism in South Africa: Implications for security sector reform

Michael Thekiso <sup>a</sup> and Christopher Isike <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Political Sciences, Faculty of Military Sciences, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa;

<sup>b</sup>Department of Political Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

## ABSTRACT

Terrorism remains a global security threat. Despite its longevity, many of its aspects remain unstudied. This article assesses the SANDF senior officers' perceptions on terrorism. This assessment is undertaken with the intention to determine whether there is a need for a security sector reform in South Africa to address a potential terrorist threat. Quantitative data was obtained from 280 senior officers of the SANDF through survey questionnaires. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics from Version 26 of IBM SPSS Computer Program. Although South Africa has not experienced large-scale terrorist attacks, the respondents exhibit substantial apprehension about the potential for such an event. Furthermore, the respondents demonstrate a heightened scepticism in the government's general response towards terrorism. Finally, there exists a widespread deficiency in the respondents' confidence on the efficacy of the anti-terrorism policy framework in addressing and preventing terrorism in South Africa. These findings suggest that there might be a need for a holistic approach to security sector reform to effectively combat and prevent terrorism in South Africa.

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Terrorism; counterterrorism; anti-terrorism; security sector reform; proximity

## Introduction

Terrorism continues to be a persistent threat within the global community. Its unpredictability, disruptiveness, destructiveness and transnational nature, has prompted governments to pursue lasting solutions as none were immune to the threat. Most of Africa's regions, barring from Southern Africa, have long suffered from terrorist attacks. However, with the advent of the Islamist insurgency in Cabo del Gado, Mozambique, the region has experienced its first wave of terrorist attacks. The question of its readiness, albeit through public opinion, becomes ever relevant. More specifically, as the region's hegemon, assuming moral and social responsibilities, a study of South Africa's state of readiness to prevent and combat terrorism is necessary.

Most of the literature on terrorism have concentrated on the general populace, so excluding essential stakeholders from this critical discourse. This is despite some of these key actors having been on the forefront of counterterrorism operations. For instance, Rounds Six (2014/

**CONTACT** Christopher Isike  [christopher.isike@up.ac.za](mailto:christopher.isike@up.ac.za)

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15) and Seven (2016/18) of the Afrobarometer Surveys, conducted face-to-face interviews on the subject of terrorism with the regular citizens of several African nations.<sup>1</sup> These studies revealed that 35% of the respondents exhibited low trust in the South African Police Services (SAPS), but 54% expressed trust in the SANDF. Moreover, 54% of the respondents thought that the government was handling extremist violence ‘fairly badly’ or ‘very badly’.<sup>2</sup> A study conducted by Schoeman and Cachalia (2017) concentrated exclusively on South Africa, using interviews with 40 government officials, civil society representatives, security analysts, academics, members of the diplomatic corps and community leaders. The key findings of this study is that the respondents appeared to minimise the likelihood of a large-scale terrorist attack in South Africa. As a result, the respondents made no pronouncements on their levels of confidence on the government’s ability to address a terrorist threat in South Africa. These limited case studies clearly indicate that significant role players, including the SANDF, have been excluded from the assessment of counterterrorism studies in the literature. It is upon this apparent deficiency that this study was conceived.

This study seeks to examine the perceptions of the senior officers within the South African National Defence (SANDF) regarding terrorism, and the government’s response thereto. The paper is derived from the author’s Ph.D thesis completed in 2024. The thesis is a mixed methods study aimed at assessing the government’s preparedness to combat and prevent terrorism. In this submission, the author includes solely the quantitative component of the thesis. The article is organised as follows: First, the materials and methods employed in the study will be highlighted; Second, the author will present the results of the quantitative data gathered; Last, the paper will be concluded by a discussion of the results.

## Materials and Methods

The quantitative data was collected using close-ended survey questionnaires which were completed by the senior officers of the SANDF.<sup>3</sup> These were used to extract the respondents’ general knowledge on terrorism as well as those factors that apparently predisposed South Africa to it. The questionnaire also solicited information on the confidence levels of the respondents in the potential general response of the government towards a terrorist event, as well as in the anti-terror policy framework.

By 2020, the Department of Defence’s (DoD) personnel strength was estimated to be at 61,482 of the regular forces (Defence Act Personnel – DAP) distributed among the different Arms of Service (AoS) (Table 1). This served as the target population of this study.<sup>4</sup>

From the total personnel strength of the DAP, 5924 comprised of senior officer corps of the SANDF (Table 2). This was the study population of the study, subdivided into three strata (each comprising of one rank group).

Using a study population of 5924 senior officers, a margin of error of five per cent, a confidence level of 90% and a response distribution of 50%, Raosoft.Inc was used to determine the

**Table 1.** Target population – DAP of the SANDF.

Arm of service	Total personnel strength in numbers	Total personnel strength in %
South African Army (SA Army)	37,782	61
South African Air Force (SAAF)	9799	16
South African Navy (SAN)	6599	11
South African Military Health Services (SAMHS)	7302	12
Total	61,482	100

Source: Mapisa-Nqakula (2020).

**Table 2.** Study population – senior officers of the SANDF.

Rank	Total	Total in %
Col/Capt (SAN)	754	13%
Lt Col/Cdr	2362	40%
Maj/Lt Cdr	2808	47%
Total	5924	100%

Source: Mapisa-Nqakula (2020).

required sample size of 259. The final achieved sample was 280 (Table 3), slightly higher than the required sample, which is generally considered good for the study as a larger sample is often associated with a higher level of accuracy.<sup>5</sup>

As seen in Table 4, the descriptive statistics highlight diverse nature of the respondents who came from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, religions, provinces, educational levels and corps (areas of expertise).

A stratified random sampling technique, which is part of the probability sampling method was used to achieve the 259 sample used in the study. These were selected from several units of the SANDF situated in Saldanha, Langebaanweg, Simonstown (All in the Western Cape Province of South Africa), Pretoria (Gauteng Province) and Potchefstroom (Northwest Province).

This study does not intend to portray the senior officers of the SANDF as subject matter experts insofar as terrorism is concerned. Neither does it seek to cast them as primary actors in the execution of counterterrorism operations. Nevertheless, the selection of the senior officers of the SANDF as the primary quantitative respondents was necessitated and justified by several factors. These officers, in addition to their responsibilities as staff officers, have a minimum of 15 years of military service, during which they have occupied various tactical, operational and/or strategic positions; which may have included counterterrorism operations and policy formulation. The officers are likely to participate in the creation of anti-terrorism policy frameworks which would prescribe how South Africa would address a potential terrorist threat. The officers have received extensive education, training and development which have been put into practice in a number of operational deployments and other diplomatic engagements.

Considering the prolonged use of the military as a key response to terrorism, there is no doubt that the perspectives of the senior officers are worthy to be studied due to their potential involvement in the development of anti – or counterterrorism policies or operations, which may in turn influence how the government responds to terrorism. They may reveal their current perspectives on the readiness of the government's response to terrorism, which is one of the study's main foci. Additionally, this could influence the states' operational and potential future policy inclinations in relation to thwarting a terrorist attack in South Africa. These viewpoints might help determine whether or not, South Africa needs a reform of its security sector.

**Table 3.** Achieved sample size.

Arm of service	Col/Capt (SAN)	Lt Col/Cdr	Maj/Lt Cdr	Total
SA Army	13	32	137	<b>182</b>
SAAF	8	15	24	<b>47</b>
SAN	3	14	14	<b>31</b>
SAMHS	5	10	5	<b>20</b>
Total	29	71	180	<b>280</b>

Source: Authors' compilations.

**Table 4.** Profile of the respondents (*N* = 280).

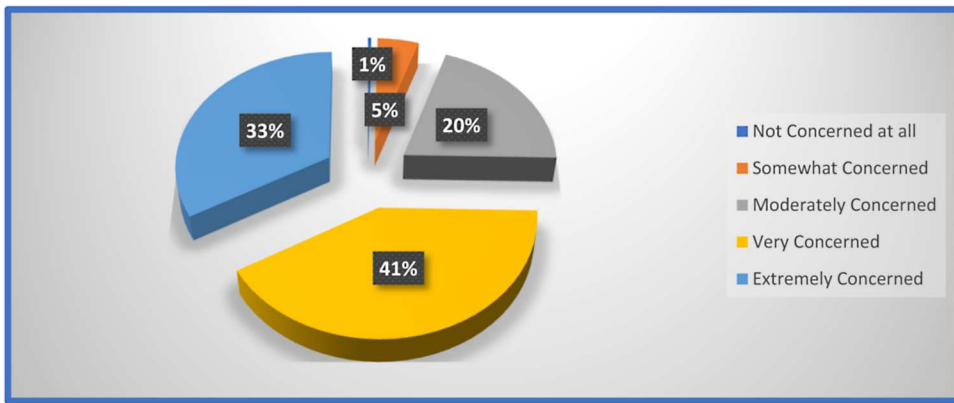
Demographic variables		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	208	74.3%
	Female	72	25.7%
Arms of service	SA Army	182	65%
	SA Air Force	47	16.8%
	SA Navy	31	11.1%
	SAMHS	20	7.1%
Race	African	183	65.4%
	White	59	21.1%
	Coloured	37	13.2%
	Indian	1	0.4%
Senior officers	Maj/Lt Cdr	181	64.6%
	Lt Col/Cdr	70	25%
	Col/Capt (SAN)	29	10.4%
Highest levels of education	Grade 10	12	4.3%
	Grade 11	1	0.4%
	Grade 12	75	26.8%
	Diploma	53	18.9%
	Bachelor's	70	25%
	Honour's	37	13.2%
	Master's	19	6.8%
	PhD	13	4.6%
Religion	Christianity	248	88.6%
	Islam	1	0.4%
	Traditional	16	5.7%
	Buddhism	1	0.4%
	Hinduism	1	0.4%
	Atheism	8	2.9%
	Agnostic	5	1.8%
Province	Eastern Cape	14	5%
	Free State	6	2.1%
	Gauteng	134	47.9%
	KwaZulu-Natal	8	2.9%
	Limpopo	17	6.1%
	Mpumalanga	3	1.1%
	Northern Cape	11	3.9%
	North-West	14	5%
	Western Cape	73	26%

Source: Authors' compilations.

## Results

A Lickert Scale was used to collect data about the respondents' attitudes and opinions about various issues related to terrorism in South Africa. In relation to concerns of potential terrorist attacks in South Africa, 33% of the 280 respondents indicated that they were extremely concerned. Forty-one per cent were very concerned, while 20% reported a moderate level of concern. Only five and one percents expressed that they were somewhat concerned and not concerned, respectively (Figure 1).

Participants were also questioned about the factors that contributed to their concern of terrorism. Fifty-four per cent expressed a strong agreement that porous borders were likely to make South Africa susceptible to terrorism. For the 50% and 40%, it was the lack of tighter immigration control and potential for spill over attacks, respectively, that was likely to predispose South Africa to potential acts of terror. Additionally, 28%, 24% and 23% were in strong agreement that occasional xenophobic attacks, South Africa's role in combatting terrorism and its potential as a terrorist hotbed, respectively, made South Africa susceptible to terrorist attacks. While 29% were in strong agreement that the presence of known terrorist organisations may predispose South Africa to terrorism, a further 20% were also of strong



**Figure 1.** Concern about the terrorism threat in South Africa. Source: Authors' compilations.

agreement that South Africa was vulnerable to terrorism because of its potential as a target (Table 5).

Regarding their perceptions about which of the sources of information about terrorism were important, a total of 92% viewed the internet as somewhat important, very important and extremely important. The TV/News Info was deemed accordingly by 89% of the participants while 79% perceived the information from the radio in a similar manner. This was followed by 68% who regarded government communication/warnings similarly. Film/documentaries were deemed somewhat important, very important and extremely important by 64% of the respondents (Table 6).

When questioned about their thoughts on how the South African government informs the public about terrorism, many respondents voiced strong dissatisfaction. Approximately 86% expressed varying degrees of agreement that the government's communication on this issue did not instil confidence. Furthermore, 84% expressed agreement – ranging from moderate to strong – that they thought the government might be withholding information connected to terrorism from the public. About 76% felt that institutional distrust and uncertainty among the populace were exacerbated by poor government communication (Table 7).

When asked about their overall sentiments regarding their trust levels in the government's reaction to terrorism, the respondents expressed a significant degree of lack of confidence. A total of 53% expressed lack of confidence in South Africa's response to terrorism. An additional 63% were not convinced that limited activity indicated success in institutions and policies of the government in relation to terrorism. About 52% of the respondents had

**Table 5.** Attitudes towards pre-disposure to terrorism in South Africa (PDP).

Attitude towards	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Moderately agree	Agree	Strongly agree
PDP1 Porous Borders	4.3%	2.9%	13.9%	24.3%	54.6%
PDP2 Known Terrorist Organisations	3.6%	9.3%	33.9%	33.2%	20%
PDP3 Potential Target	13.9%	21.1%	21.8%	24.3%	18.9%
PDP4 Spillover Attacks	1.4%	3.2%	16.1%	38.6%	40.4%
PDP5 Lack of tighter Immigration Control	2.1%	3.9%	11.1%	32.9%	49.6%
PDP6 Role in Combatting Terrorism	4.3%	11.8%	27.1%	33.2%	23.6%
PDP7 Xenophobia Attacks	3.9%	6.4%	26.4%	35.4%	27.9%
PDP8 Potential Hotbed	3.2%	9.3%	32.9%	31.8%	22.9%

Source: Authors' compilations.

**Table 6.** Most important sources of information about terrorism (SIT).

Source of information	Not at all important	Slightly important	Sometimes important	Very important	Extremely important
SIT1 Film/Doc	14.6%	21.8%	36.1%	18.9%	8.6%
SIT2 Internet/World Wide Web	1.8%	6.4%	21.4%	42.5%	27.9%
SIT3 Radio	8.2%	13.2%	32.9%	33.6%	12.1%
SIT4 Television/News Info	2.5%	7.9%	26.1%	38.9%	24.6%
SIT5 Government Communication/Warnings	15.7%	15.4%	22.9%	25.4%	20%

Source: Authors' compilations.

no confidence in the effectiveness of the government's counterterrorism institutions, legislation and policies. A further 57% were not convinced that South Africa's institutions were capacitated to combat terrorism. Finally, 67% of the respondents expressed the view that the SANDF was the most suited to combat terrorism in South Africa (Table 8).

When enquiring about the specific selected anti-terrorism institutions in South Africa, the respondents expressed varying degrees of confidence. For example, 68% indicated that they were somewhat, fairly, or completely confident in the SAPS-Special Task Force (SAPS-STF). Fifty-five per cent expressed confidence in the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA). Similarly, 52% of participants were somewhat confident, fairly confident and completely confident in the State Security Agency (SSA). An additional 52% expressed the same for the SAPS Directorate Priority Crimes Investigations (DPCI). An underwhelming 24% indicated that they were somewhat confident, fairly confident or completely confident in the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) (Table 9).

Despite some of the respondents expressing no knowledge of the existing and selected anti-terror legislation, some expressed a moderate degree of confidence. An average of 22% indicated that they were not aware of anti-terror legislation presented before them. A total of 45%, 41%, 43% and 44% were somewhat confident, fairly confident and completely confident in the Protection of Constitutional Democracy against Terrorist Acts (PROCDATARA), Regulation of Foreign Military Assistance Act, Financial Intelligence Centre Act and Cyber Terrorism Act, respectively (Table 10).

## Discussion

After the 9/11 terror attacks in New York, people worldwide started to question the preparedness of their government institutions for potential terrorist attacks. This article took a proactive analytical approach on this key issue. The senior officers of the SANDF were crucially selected as key informant stakeholders because of their probable involvement in counterterrorism. My analysis contributes to this discussion by addressing the following three key questions: (1) What is the perspective of senior officers regarding the likelihood of terrorism in South Africa? (2) With no significant acts of terrorism in South Africa, what are the factors

**Table 7.** Communication about terrorism (COMT).

Views on communications about terrorism	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Moderately agree	Agree	Strongly agree
COMT1 Do not inspire confidence	5.7%	7.9%	26.4%	32.1%	27.9%
COMT2 Possible unreported attacks	4.3%	11.4%	32.5%	34.6%	17.1%
COMT3 Fosters distrust and uncertainty	6.8%	17.3%	44.2%	24.5%	7.2%

Source: Authors' compilations.

**Table 8.** Confidence in terrorism response (CONT).

	Attitude	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Moderately agree	Agree	Strongly agree
CONT1	I have confidence in SA's response to Terrorism	20.7%	31.8%	30.4%	12.9%	3.9%
CONT2	Limited activity indicates success in institutions and policies	24.3%	38.2%	27.1%	7.9%	2.1%
CONT3	SA's counter-terrorism institutions, legislation and policies are effective	17.1%	33.9%	36.1%	8.2%	3.9%
CONT4	SA's institutions are well capacitated to combat terrorism	22.5%	34.3%	28.6%	10.7%	3.2%
CONT5	The SANDF is the most effective institution to combat terrorism in South Africa	10.0%	22.9%	30.4%	18.6%	18.2%

Source: Authors' compilations.

that contribute to concerns about terrorism in the country? (3) Last, how do the respondents perceive the government's response to potential terrorist attacks?

The analysis resulted in five key conclusions. First, the senior officers of the SANDF appear to exhibit high level of concern about the potential for a terrorist attack in South Africa. Given the absence of any notable terrorist attacks since 2001, this result was very surprising.

Second, the concern about terrorism in a country which has no recent history of substantial terrorist activities implies that there may be other variables contributing to the potential for terrorism in South Africa. The senior officers highlighted that South Africa's vulnerability to terrorism could be attributed to porous borders, inadequate immigration controls and the potential for spill-over attacks from Mozambique.

Third, the findings indicate a higher degree of disappointment in how the South African government communicates issues regarding terrorism. The respondents preferred the internet as a primary communication source of terrorism-related information, rather than the government. As a result, the respondents seem to suggest that there was a likelihood that government institutions were withholding information from the public. This finding implies a significant deficiency in the government's communication efforts towards the respondents.

Last, the respondents seem to doubt the government's capability to handle terrorist-related crises. Respondents do not feel that the absence of terrorism in South Africa is directly due to the government's efforts. The survey respondents expressed a strong lack of confidence in the DHA, Crimes Against the State (CAT) (SAPS), SSA and the NPA, whereas they viewed the SAPS-STF favourably. Similarly, there appears to be a high level of doubt over the effectiveness of the anti-terrorism laws, leading to widespread apathy among the respondents.

**Table 9.** Confidence in anti-terror institutions (ATI).

	Terrorist Tactics	Not Confident at all	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident
ATI1	Crimes Against State Section-DPCI SAPS	23.6%	24.6%	32.5%	15%	3.9%
ATI2	State Security Agency	22.1%	25.4%	25.4%	21.1%	5.4%
ATI3	SAPS Special Task Force	12.9%	19.3%	27.9%	27.9%	11.1%
ATI4	National Prosecuting Authority	20.7%	24.3%	28.9%	17.9%	7.5%
ATI5	Department of Home Affairs	48.2%	27.1%	13.9%	7.1%	2.5%

Source: Authors' compilations.

**Table 10.** Confidence in anti-terror legislation (ATL).

	Terrorist tactics	Not aware	Not confident at all	Slightly confident	Somewhat confident	Fairly confident	Completely confident
ATL1	Protection of Constitutional Democracy against Terrorist Acts	22.6%	11.1%	21.1%	28.2%	14.3%	2.5%
ATL2	Regulation of Foreign Military Assistance Act 15 of 1998	23.2%	12.1%	23.2%	24.3%	12.1%	4.3%
ATL3	Financial Intelligence Centre Act 38 of 2001	20.7%	15.4%	21.1%	25%	12.5%	5%
ATL4	Cyber Terrorism Act 19 of 2020	19.3%	11.8%	24.3%	25.4%	15.4%	3.6%

Source: Authors' compilations.

Studies from several regions show that individuals' perspectives on terrorism are influenced by their proximity to terrorist incidents. In a study by Hasin, Keyes, Katherine, Hatzenbuehler, Aharonovich and Alderson, those who were indirectly affected by terrorism, showed increased fear about the possibility of its recurrence.<sup>6</sup> Agerberg and Sohlberg found that those who had directly witnessed acts of terrorism were more likely to be significantly affected by such situations due to their physical proximity.<sup>7</sup> While these individuals expressed fears about the possibility of terrorist attacks happening again, they did not exhibit heightened rally effects, increased aversion towards outgroups, preferences for intrusive security policies, or notable emotional effects.<sup>8</sup> Avdan and Webb concluded that the perception of terrorist threats is influenced by the physical and personal proximity to terrorist acts.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, proximity to terrorism, whether in terms of personal, physical or psychological proximity, played an important role in the perceptions of respondents on terrorism.

The research cited above shows a lack of consistency with a limited number of related studies carried in South Africa. Two research projects presented contrasting findings regarding the likelihood of a terrorist attack occurring in the country. The participants in the study by Schoeman and Cachalia recognised the potential for terrorist attacks in South Africa but considered the risk to be minimal, and possibly inconsequential.<sup>10</sup> This can be attributed to a range of variables, including foreign policy decisions such as South Africa's adoption of non-interventionist and unilateral policies, along with domestic circumstances. The domestic factors indicate that the underlying conditions that lead to radicalisation, such as marginalisation, political and religious oppression, or relative deprivation, were not prevalent within the South African context.

Furthermore, the Muslim community in South Africa has not explicitly endorsed or sympathised with the objectives advocated by Jihadist organisations.<sup>11</sup> Nkomo and Buchanan-Clarke discovered that more than 30% of the respondents considered security-related problems a major national issue, even though their study did not specifically address Islamic terrorism as a security threat.<sup>12</sup> In a country with high levels of crime, this finding was not surprising. In South Africa, proximity to terrorism does not appear to influence the perceptions of participants on terrorism.

Nkomo and Buchanan-Clarke are of the view that the porous nature of South Africa's borders and the high level of internal migration in the country could have made it easier for individuals with terrorist intent to enter and leave the country.<sup>13</sup> Such a view is further shared by Schoeman and Cachalia, who suggest that the modern infrastructure in South Africa facilitates communication, transportation and business opportunities for potential

terrorists.<sup>14</sup> Given these circumstances, Hamilton, Bax and Sayed are convinced that porous borders in Southern Africa create a favourable environment for potential terrorists who may target South Africa or use it as a transit point for overseas Jihadists travelling to South Africa and other locations.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, there has been several instances where South Africa's poor immigration controls have been exploited, and inadvertently facilitated movement of individuals known to have had affiliations with Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda.<sup>16</sup> Examples include individuals such as Khalfan Khamis Mohamed, a Tanzanian individual who received training from Al-Qaeda.<sup>17</sup> In 1999, he was apprehended in Cape Town due to his involvement in the US Embassy bombings.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Samantha Lewthwaite, who is associated with Al-Shabaab, has been implicated in the planning of numerous terrorist acts resulting in the loss of hundreds of lives.<sup>19</sup> The White Widow, as she is notoriously known, intermittently resided in South Africa and utilised a counterfeit South African passport for travels.<sup>20</sup>

Equally, the concerns around the possibility of a terrorist attack specifically targeting South Africa due to its involvement in SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) may be justified. Terrorist groups have shown a tendency to redirect their hostility against countries that are perceived to be aiding in the prevention of terrorism. For example, the US has been a significant target of terrorist attacks historically, but several European nations have also suffered from terrorist activities.<sup>21</sup> This is due to their collaboration with the US and their proactive participation in counterterrorism efforts led by the US. However, this is not to suggest that Europe had been devoid of terrorist activity prior to 9/11, but rather that contemporary Islamic fundamentalism in Europe is heavily influenced by its support to the US' War on Terror. Consequently, cities such as Brussels, London, Madrid and Paris, have all borne the brunt of terrorism to a devastating effect.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, in East Africa, to mitigate the frequency of Al-Shabaab's attacks, Kenya actively engaged in the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). As a result, Al-Shabaab retaliated by carrying out acts of violence within the borders of Kenya, leading to a significant loss of human lives.<sup>23</sup> The retaliatory attacks were not limited to Kenya alone; other AMISOM countries also experienced similar attacks, albeit to a lesser extent.<sup>24</sup> In a similar vein, the involvement of South Africa in SAMIM can be interpreted by terrorists as a direct act of opposition to their agenda.

Governments, and particularly their security agencies, are known to deal with sensitive issues such as terrorism, on a need-to-know basis. This means that only those that are directly involved, whether in policy formulation or in operations, are privy to such information. One plausible explanation for this phenomenon can be attributed to the inherent propensity of intelligence organisations to maintain a clandestine *modus operandi*. The primary objective of this practice is primarily to acquire and maintain a strategic and an operational advantage over their potential adversaries. Alternatively, this approach might also be employed to mitigate anxiety and panic stemming from potential acts of terrorism. In addition, seeing that the threat at the moment, is a matter of much speculation and largely imaginary, the government can argue that there is nothing to be communicated to the population. What is very likely, is that the security institutions choose to be silent on counterterrorism operations to avoid direct confrontation with the terrorist organisations because of deaths or arrests of terrorists in the country.

The current research findings on the government's communication with the public about terrorism differ from earlier studies conducted on national disasters. In another researchers assessed government communications during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers specifically evaluated the focus and trends observed in the 483 press statements that were

produced by the government and made available on South Africa's official corona virus website. The findings revealed a systematic and unwavering endeavour to deliver prompt, precise, and dependable information that empowers the overall populace.<sup>25</sup> These press announcements were supplemented with information disseminated through official social media channels, as well as radio and television broadcasts. This demonstrates the government's ability to engage in efficient contact with its citizenry when necessary.

The findings pertaining to the absence of communication hold significant importance within the framework of this study due to their substantial practical consequences. The absence of formal communication regarding terrorism is anticipated to result in misconceptions regarding government's approach to manage the crisis.<sup>26</sup> In the absence of awareness of terrorist operations, individuals may lack the necessary understanding of appropriate responses, designated safe areas, recommended actions and relevant authorities to consult in the event of a terrorist incident occurring within the boundaries of South Africa. In such a scenario, individuals may lack the necessary knowledge regarding the appropriate indicators to observe and prospective culprits to be aware of. This ambivalence has the potential to accidentally result in increased levels of destruction and loss of human lives, unless it is appropriately addressed and managed.

Communicating with the public has the potential to reveal the population as a valuable source of intelligence regarding terrorism, as they may live near potential terrorists and have valuable insights to offer in this regard. Some argue that government's responsiveness and accountability can be assessed by promoting information exchange and providing citizens with a platform to voice their thoughts.<sup>27</sup> Hence, it is imperative for the government to give high priority to, among other things, the efficient dissemination of information pertaining to terrorism. This would subsequently assist in protecting lives and property, while also helping in the long-term execution of security sector reform.

Negative perceptions about the South African government's institutions to combat terrorism call into question their effectiveness in counterterrorism-related matters. However, lack of confidence in government's institutions should be seen in a broader global context. Edelman observes that 'the most recent data indicate a rapid loss of trust in other people as well as in all traditional institutions, both at the government and business levels, in many countries over the last twenty years'.<sup>28</sup> It appears, therefore, that South Africa has not been immune to global trends related to the decline in public trust, particularly where terrorism is concerned.

Subsequently, the respondents have exhibited varying levels of confidence in the government institutions. On both extremes, the respondents exhibited a serious deficit of confidence in the DHA and a significant degree of confidence in the SAPS-STF. Almost a quarter of the respondents lacked confidence in the likes of the CAT (SAPS), SSA and NPA. The finding pertaining to the CAT (SAPS) and SAPS-STF is rather interesting. While the respondents exhibited confidence in the latter, the former was not viewed favourably. In the research by Nkomo and Buchanan-Clarke only 35% of the respondents showed confidence in the SAPS, as compared to 54% who expressed confidence in the SANDF.<sup>29</sup> The research suggests that due to the unique set of skills, the respondents are more confident of the SAPS-STF in particular, but rather disillusioned with the SAPS in general.

There are various factors that informs these negative perceptions and lack of confidence in the various anti-terrorism institutions in South Africa. First, in the case of the DHA, perceived corruption thereof, and mismanagement by its officials seem to be at the top of the causes. The officials of the department have been accused of conducting corrupt activities by illegally issuing identity documents and travel documents to foreign nationals who did not meet the

minimum standards to possess such.<sup>30</sup> This can inadvertently lead to complicity in terrorist activities. In 2013, Samantha Lewthwaite, a widow to one of the 7 July 2005 London bombers, and a suspected mastermind of the Westgate Mall attack in Kenya on 21 September 2013 which left 67 people dead, was spotted in South Africa spying on foreign embassies.<sup>31</sup> Following the attacks in the Westgate Mall, in her apartment in Kenya, a South African passport was found.<sup>32</sup> Questions as to how Samantha Lewthwaite entered and left South Africa, how South Africa's identity documents and passports were found in her former apartment, can only lead to a conclusion about the ease of forging South African documents and/or the high levels of corruption within the DHA. For this reason, the parliament has raised its concern over the number of syndicates that are continuously trying to forge South African documents and have also applauded the department's anti-corruption operations which have resulted in the arrests of some of the DHA officials.<sup>33</sup>

Second, the NPA, particularly the Priority Crimes Litigation Unit (PCLU), has been able to apply the anti-terrorism laws successfully to convict several perpetrators. For example, on 26 March 2013, Henry Okah, the Nigerian terrorist was convicted in South Africa for 24 years for the deaths of a total of 37 people and 47 injured in two car bombs which occurred on 15 March and 1 October 2010, respectively, in Abuja.<sup>34</sup> Recently, the Thulsie twins were convicted for attempting to join ISIL and conducting terrorist activities in South Africa, for which they pled guilty. However, having spent time in jail while awaiting trial, their sentences were commuted to time served and were subsequently released in 2022.<sup>35</sup>

Despite these achievements, the NPA's reputation has been tarnished in recent years. Some authors have commented that the independence of the NPA and by implication, the NDPP, has become a highly politicised matter.<sup>36</sup> Nowhere else is this politicisation more evident than in the appointments of the NDPPs. The law provides that the president appoints the National Director of Public Prosecutions (NDPP) for a non-renewable 10-year period, but still prescribes stringent conditions under which the NDPP may be impeached.<sup>37</sup> However, none of the NDPPs to date have come close to completing their terms. South Africa should at least be on its fourth NDPP, instead of its current ninth. Bulelani Ngcuka is the longest serving NDPP after the attainment of democracy in 1994 (1998-2004) while others, barring for Shamila Batohi (2019-present), have only gone as far as completing three years of service.<sup>38</sup> This is indicative of leadership instability at the top because of political meddling in the affairs of the NPA. Under such a political climate, important security issues, including terrorism, might take time to be addressed. In fact, some scholars have attributed the NPA's decisions not to prosecute on a few cases due to this heavy politicisation to the declining prosecution rate by the NPA.<sup>39</sup>

In the third instance, judging by its operational nature and a unique set of skills, the SAPS-STF appears not to have been tainted by any of the political wrangling that is so common in other government institutions. It also seems to be well-trained and experienced to deal with any of the terrorist eventuality that the country may experience. However, the picture in the greater SAPS is a far cry from that of the STF, as shown by low confidence levels from the respondents.<sup>40</sup> This is further compounded by the fact the respondents in the study by Nkomo and Buchanan-Clarke widely perceived the police as corrupt (48%).<sup>41</sup> This was preceded by a 2008 report by the 14 retired police commissioners appointed by the former police commissioner, Jackie Selebi in 2006.<sup>42</sup> Key amongst findings of the report is that 'Non-existent planning, inadequate training and rampant corruption are fatally weakening the [SAPS'] battle against crime' by inference the potential battle against terrorism too.<sup>43</sup> The SAPS is also not immune to a host of austerity measures that are commonplace to all

other institutions. These challenges: budgetary constraints, lack of personnel and high crime rates, among others, are likely to hamper the SAPS's response to a potential terrorist attack.

Fourth, the establishment of key review panels into the workings of the SSA is indicative of an institution beset with devastating and potentially paralysing problems. In June 2018, President Cyril Ramaphosa established the High-Level Review Panel into the SSA whose 'key objective was to enable the reconstruction of a professional national intelligence capability for South Africa that will respect and uphold the Constitution, and the relevant legislative pre-prescripts', under the chairmanship of former government official, Sydney Mufumadi.<sup>44</sup> The key finding of the report was:

... that there has been a serious politicisation and factionalisation of the intelligence community over the past decade or more, based on factions in the ruling party, resulting in an almost complete disregard for the Constitution, policy, legislation and other pre-prescripts, and turning our civilian intelligence community into a private resource to serve the political and personal interests of particular individuals.

This scathing report was followed by yet another establishment of an Expert Panel to 'lead a thorough and critical review of our preparedness and the shortcomings in our Response', led by Prof Sandy Africa.<sup>45</sup> This panel was established because of the widespread and violent civil unrest that engulfed parts of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng in July 2021. The report by the Expert Panel revealed that most parts of the national and provincial governments, as well as the civil society, believed that there was a 'major failure of intelligence' with regards to the July 2021 incidents.<sup>46</sup> However, the intelligence community asserted that it had sufficiently warned the government about the prevailing dissatisfaction and the possible ramifications thereof, which were not acted upon by the institutions such as the SAPS and the SANDF, among others.<sup>47</sup> This indicates a serious lack of communication and coordination between these key government institutions.

Last, the views about the SANDF appears to be in a state of ambivalence. On the one hand, the respondents view the SANDF favourably. This is supported by the views from the research by Nkomo and Buchanan-Clarke as well as by those from the current study.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, there are persistent problems experienced by the SANDF that may render its counter-terrorism response ineffective. The former view can be attributed to the fact that the SANDF is often portrayed in a good light due to its support to the SAPS and other government departments. Some of these initiatives include the enforcement of national lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, stemming the flow of illegal immigrants, anti-illegal mining operations, quelling of the July 2021 uprising, and safeguarding of transportation after truck arson, among others.<sup>49</sup> These operations take place under a climate where the SANDF is largely stymied by a range of systemic challenges. According to Solomon, these challenges include amongst others, the subpar state of fitness of the soldiers, aged servicemen, lack of funds, lack of training exercises and the deplorable state of equipment.<sup>50</sup> While participation in support of the SAPS indicates an active, ready-to-serve force, the challenges expressed herein cast doubt into the SANDF's state of readiness to combat terrorism in South Africa.

### ***Implications for Policy***

The practical ramifications of this situation necessitate that the government devise strategies to alleviate the concerns of the respondents. This implies the necessity of using a variety of security measures to mitigate the concerns. This may encompass various factors, including

the level of visibility granted to law enforcement officials, the effectiveness of contingency planning that is well conveyed, and the procedures in place for managing post-attack disasters. However, it is important to note that achieving complete prevention of terrorism is an idealistic objective. Regardless, the South African government bears the responsibility of addressing the underlying factors that may contribute to radicalisation and eventual involvement in terrorist acts. The implementation of proactive measures, which include preventive and contingency planning, holds significance in order to foresee and mitigate the likelihood of a potential attack occurring in South Africa.

Irrespective of the causes for this ineffective communication, it is essential to underscore the importance of successfully communicating about these occurrences. Democratic governments have a responsibility to efficiently communicate information about their policies and actions to the public. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), citizens, including the key stakeholders of this study, have a legitimate right to be informed about the policies and actions of their respective governments.<sup>51</sup> Ironically, the South African government recognises the need to consistently offer information to all citizens, emphasising the responsibility to enable universal access to government-related information.<sup>52</sup> The GCIS further underscores the crucial need of effective communication to both shape public opinion and uphold the government's legitimacy.<sup>53</sup> For communication to be efficient and useful, it is important that the information being transmitted is both reliable and timely (OECD, 1996). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the government to guarantee the delivery of clear and concise information to keep the citizens of South Africa well-informed about the latest developments.<sup>54</sup>

Advocacy for effective government communication holds much validity during periods of crises. The effective communication of a government is crucial for establishing its legitimacy, enhancing its reputation, managing disaster and ensuring the well-being of its population.<sup>55</sup> Based on this reasoning, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) asserted that:

Public officials must be prepared to communicate effectively with the public and the media to deliver messages that inform without frightening and educate without provoking alarm whenever acts of terrorism, mass violence, natural or other disasters, and public health emergencies occur.<sup>56</sup>

In lieu of the above, the research recommends changes under a broad framework of security sector reform security practitioners in South Africa. What is envisaged in this reform is the following:

- **Establishment of Professional Security Institutions.** The re-establishment of the existing or perhaps new security institutions to meet professional standards is recommended. This implies that the government should depoliticise the security cluster or public sector by employing individuals based on merit. In other words, those that are educated, trained and skilled, as well as experienced in the field of counterterrorism, should receive priority. This also implies the enhancement of communication and coordination among the different institutions to ensure that counterterrorism operations are approached from a multi-agency point of view unhitched.
- **Reform in Government Communication Approach.** To ensure that the public is kept informed of the development of terrorism in South Africa, the government must overhaul its communication systems to make use of the exchange of information with the population. The government should prioritise informing the citizens of the potential terrorist

threat and measures to take when suspecting that a terrorist activity might take place. In the unfortunate event of the threat taking place, the South African government should explain to the population the role of various institutions in mitigating the threat. This should inherently include information regarding national disaster management, in which citizens will know precisely what to do in an event of a terrorist attack. Terrorism awareness programmes should form part of government priority to avert terrorist attacks and their destructive nature. The government must also create mechanisms through which whistle-blowers will be protected in sharing information pertaining to terrorism.

## Conclusion

Terrorism is an ever-present danger that requires innovative ideas to effectively address it. While it is generally accepted that eradicating the world off this scourge is a utopian ideal, nation-states remain responsible to at least, suppress it. This requires an understanding of its leadership, members, tactics, strategies, organisations and *modus operandi*. However, it is also important for researchers to figure out what the public opinion about terrorism and its related aspects is. In this case, the researcher focused on the opinions of the senior officers of the SANDF, with vast operational experience in tactical, operational and strategic deployments.

There is a clear apprehension expressed by the senior officers of the SANDF about the potential of a terrorist attack in South Africa. In a country that has not experienced any terrorist attack, this is rather surprising. What is even more surprising is the fact that the respondents do not believe that absence of terrorist attacks can be attributed to the management, strategies, operations and skills of the various anti-terror institutions and legislation. This is highlighted in the negative perceptions the officers have of the anti-terrorism framework. There are additional factors that contributes to officers' negative perceptions of the anti-terror framework. While negative perceptions in themselves are not a measure of the institutions' readiness or capacity to deal with terrorism, they are important in that they may drive policy making in as far as combatting terrorism is concerned. The discourse above is by no stretch of imagination complete or exhaustive enough. There exists herein avenues for further research in terms of respondents, scope and methodology to be used.

## Notes

1. Buchanan-Clarke and Lekalake, 'Violent Extremism in Africa', 1–34; Nkomo and Buchanan Clarke, 'Violent Extremism in Africa', 9.
2. *Ibid.*, 1–34.
3. Senior officers of the SANDF comprise of rank levels Major (Maj) [(SA Naval Equivalent – Lieutenant Commander (Lt Cdr), Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col) [SA Naval Equivalent – Commander (Cdr)] and Colonel (Col) [SA Naval Equivalent – Captain (South African Navy) (Capt (SAN))]. The senior officers represent a bridge between the junior officers and flag officers of the SANDF, the former at its infancy stage while the latter represents the top echelon largely responsible for the formulation of policy.
4. Mapisa-Nqakula, *Ministerial Task Team Reort*.
5. Andrade, 'Sample Size and its Importance', 102.
6. Hasin et al., 'Alcohol Consumption', 2268.
7. Agerberg and Sohlberg, 'Personal Proximity', 2533.
8. *Ibid.*, 2533.

9. Avdan and Webb, 'Not in my Backyard', 90.
10. Schoeman and Cachalia, 'Violent Extremism in South Africa', 9.
11. *Ibid.*, 10.
12. Nkomo and Buchanan-Clarke, 'Violent Extremism in Africa', 5.
13. *Ibid.*, 1.
14. Schoeman and Cachalia, 'Violent Extremism in South Africa', 10.
15. Hamilton et al., 'Understanding and Responding', 3.
16. Dagne, 'Africa and the War', 20; Glickman, 'Africa in the War', 168; Hexham, 'Religious Extremism', 18.
17. Schoeman, 'South Africa and Terrorism', 1.
18. Hamilton et al., 'Understanding and Responding', 3; Schoeman, 'South Africa and Terrorism', 1.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Weinstein et al., 'Why Are They Attacking Us?', 67–68.
22. Spiliers and Grégoire, *From Madrid to Brussels*.
23. Odhiambo et al., 'The Reprisal Attacks', 57.
24. Al Jazeera, 'Al-Shabab Claims Uganda Bombings'.
25. John et al., 'Government Communication', 3–4.
26. Schoeman and Cachalia, 'Violent Extremism', 11.
27. Vivier et al., 'From Information to Engagement', 88.
28. Borghi et al., 'Fear of the Dark', 2.
29. Nkomo and Buchana-Clarke, 'Violent Extremism in Africa', 8–9.
30. South Africa. Department of Home Affairs (DHA), Home Affairs Dismisses Two.
31. Eye Witness News, Security in SA 'Compromised'.
32. De Wet and Tolsi, 'Terror in Kenya'.
33. Molepo, *Media Statement*.
34. News24, *Henry Okah Jailed*.
35. McCain, *Thulsie Twins Released*.
36. Muntingh et al., 'An Assessment', 3.
37. Redpath, 'Failing to Prosecute?', 7.
38. ACJR Factsheet, 'The Appointment and Dismissal', 1.
39. Camerer, 'Challenges in Integrity Management', 10; Muntingh et al., 'An Assessment', 3; Schön-teich, 'A Story of Trials', 11.
40. Nkomo and Buchanan-Clarke, 'Violent Extremism in Africa', 9.
41. *Ibid.*, 9.
42. Staff Reporter. 'Shocking State of the SAPS'.
43. *Ibid.*
44. Mufumadi, *High Level Review Panel Report*.
45. Africa, *Report of the Expert Panel*.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*
48. Nkomo and Buchana-Clarke, 'Violent Extremism in Africa', 9.
49. Parliamentary Monitoring Group, SANDF Deployment; Helfrich, Flow of Illegal Immigrants; DefenceWeb, SANDF Soldiers, 2023a; South African Human Rights Commission, July's People. DefenceWeb, SANDF Deployed, 2023b.
50. Solomon, *Jihad: A South African Perspective*, 55.
51. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 'Effective Communications', 3.
52. South Africa. Government Communications and Information System (GCIS), Government Communicators' Handbook.
53. *Ibid.*
54. South Africa. Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (PME), South Africa Covid-19 Report First Edition.
55. John et al., 'Government Communication', 1.
56. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 'Communicating in a Crisis', 4.

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## Notes on contributors

**Christopher Isike** is a Professor of African Politics and International Relations and Head of Department of Political Sciences at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. The founding Director of the African Centre for the Study of the United States, University of Pretoria (ACSUS-UP), Professor Isike is also the current President of the African Association of Political Science (AAPS) and a member of the Board of Directors of Global Development Network (GDN). He also sits on the Advisory Board of Society of Gender Professionals (SGP).

**R.M.G. Thekiso** serves as a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Science within the Faculty of Military Science at Stellenbosch University. He obtained a Bachelor of Military Science in Security and African Studies from Stellenbosch University in 2003. This was followed by a BA (Honors) in African Politics and another BA (Honors) in International Politics both from the University of South Africa in 2007 and 2011 respectively. He subsequently earned an MA Arts (International Politics) from the University of South Africa. In 2024, Dr. Thekiso received Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Pretoria.

## ORCID

Michael Thekiso  <http://orcid.org/0009-0006-7302-0805>

Christopher Isike  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5528-8078>

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